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PRESS ADVISORY

No. 092-P
April 21, 1994

Secretary of Defense William Perry and General John Shalikashvili, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, will speak at a memorial service honoring the victims of last week's helicopter accident, in northern Iraq, at the Memorial Chapel, Fort Myer, on Monday, April 25, 1994, 10:30 a.m. (EDT).

Media interested in covering the memorial service should contact Ms. Patty Heard or Sgt. Jay Larson, Military District of Washington Public Affairs, (202) 475-0856.

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Memorial Service Remarks

by

President William J. Clinton,

Secretary of Defense William J. Perry, and

Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff

General John M. Shalikashvili, USA

on April 25, 1995

at

Ft. Myer, Virginia

General Shalikashvili: We have come here today to mourn and to honor the men and women -- military and civilian -- from five different nations, who so suddenly on April 14th in Northern Iraq, lost their lives in a most terrible tragedy.

The men and women who wear our nation's uniform or serve our foreign service understand full well the dangers of their profession. I have been around them for 36 years -- in peace and in war, and in far-away places like Northern Iraq. I know they seldom talk about it openly, but they know all too well that the dangers are ever present, and that tragedy can strike at any moment.

There is a special bond among us, and we feel a special loss each time a comrade in arms is taken from our midst. So it is this time.

But this loss cuts deeper, for this tragedy touches the very fabric of our institution. An institution whose code, whose passion it is to take care of each other, and to protect each other from any danger. And when that goes wrong, as it did 11 days ago, our hearts are doubly heavy, and our grief especially deep.

So to family and friends, know that we grieve with you, and that your loss is our loss. They were your sons and daughters, your parents, your friends -- but they were our comrades in arms, fellow soldiers and airmen, and State Department officers.

I will not presume to say I know your hurt. I know only that very special hurt when any service man or woman you have given into our charge falls in combat or suffers accidental death.

As much as each of us desire to alter the events of April 14th, very sadly we cannot. We can only mourn. We can strengthen our resolve to learn the truth and to fix the wrong, and take great solace and deep pride in the work they were doing to help others.

The scriptures tell us that greater love hath no person than when they lay down their lives for a friend. Feeding starving children, protecting people from a tyrant who twice before had brought death and destruction and unspeakable cruelty to his own people, they sacrificed their lives so that others might live. They and those who went before them gave life and gave hope to a people who without them would have very little reason for hope for themselves and for their children. Their efforts were selfless. Their service was valiant. Their cause was noble.

To the Kurdish people of Northern Iraq, to each of us here, to the brothers and sisters throughout the Services, they are extraordinary heroes and shining examples.

Perhaps no one understands that better or more clearly than the very people these men and women were protecting. In the dusty street of Zakho in Northern Iraq, just below the Turkish border, the people have hung hundreds of banners in remembrance of these heroes. Perhaps one banner says it as well as any other. "We mourn the loss of our heroes," the banner tells us. "God bless their souls, and God be with their families," it concludes.

We, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the men and women of our armed forces and our families offer our prayers and our deepest sympathies to the families of all who died that tragic day. And we honor and salute them, and pray that God will now embrace them in His kingdom.

Secretary Perry: I want to share my deep sense of personal loss over the deaths of the fine men and women we mourn today. I also want to extend my most heartfelt sympathy to those who have lost loved ones in this terrible tragedy. And I want to share my deep sorrow with the other nations that lost their sons.

Those who died were brave, generous individuals doing a tough job under hazardous conditions. They gave their lives so that others might live. This is the greatest work that God can have us do. In our hearts and memories, they will always be with us.

Lieutenant Laura Piper's mother summed it up with great wisdom. She said, "People are always wondering where are our role models today. Well, here they are."

Their mission was critically important. While the world's attention has been captured by other conflicts and crises, Operation Provide Comfort continues. We've saved tens of thousands of lives. We've escorted half a million Kurdish people from exile in bitter cold mountains and returned them to their homes. The no-fly zone we continue to enforce over Northern Iraq has stopped Saddam Hussein from using air and ground attack to terrorize the Kurds.

America and our Gulf War allies decisively won Desert Storm, but we cannot and will not turn our backs on the innocent people who would suffer an Iraqi vengeance.

Those we remember today were on a noble mission, and America deeply appreciates it. The Kurdish people appreciate it, too.

Last week a Kurdish religious leader said, "They came to us to save us and give us dignity. Their sacrifice will remain in the minds of our children for the rest of their lives. We will teach their names to our children, and keep their names in our book of history as heroes who gave their lives for our freedom."

In the military, we are family. When we lose members of our family, particularly in tragic circumstances, it's hard to take. While all Service men and women are prepared for the risks that come with military lives, we are still shocked and devastated when the lives are actually lost. It reminds us of the dangers that our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines face every day, and how vigilance and courage are part of the job.

This was a very complex operation, and no system will ever be 100 percent perfect. Flying these sorts of missions is a task of immense difficulty -- quick judgments, fast reactions, and great skill are constantly required. I have flown in the back seat of an F-15 on a simulated mission, and I have some understanding of the strain and the fast pace of events. But we are deeply committed to ensuring that our men and women in uniform can meet this challenge safely by providing the best, the most challenging, and the most effective training possible. When something does go wrong, I pledge to you that we will have a full accountability of what happened, and I also pledge to you that we will ensure that it cannot happen again.

All of us recognize that defending our nation and deterring aggression will never be risk-free. General Robert E. Lee once said, "There is always hazard in military movements. But we must decide between the possible loss of inaction and the risk of action. That risk is the price we pay for freedom and security. And in the ultimate display of patriotism, pride, and public service, our men and women in uniform have agreed to pay the price for us.

Their friends and families also pay a price. Family members face long periods of separation, and often endure agonizing uncertainty when Service members are sent on hazardous missions. We owe a special debt of gratitude to the families who have waited and hoped and suffered.

Those we honor today, both military and civilian, are in our thoughts and our prayers. We remember their courage, their devotion to duty, and their commitment to their country. They and their families deserve our deepest thanks.

There is a painting that hangs across my office at the Pentagon that depicts a soldier in church praying with his family, perhaps before an overseas deployment. Below this picture is an inscription from Isaiah. It says, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" When the individuals we remember today received that call they answered, "Here am I. Send me."

Today we pay tribute to all of those who answered the call, and ask God to take them in his care.

President Clinton: Today in this chapel built for heroes we come to mourn the lives and to celebrate the lives of those who died on April 14th. To all the families who are here present, and the families who are not here, I think it should be clear that in addition to the distinguished leaders of our military, the clergy, and the friends, the spirit of all Americans is in this chapel today. The hearts of all Americans have gone out to these families.

When we joined three years ago with Britain and France and Turkey to protect the Kurds of Northern Iraq, to shelter them from air attacks, to sustain them with shoes and coats and food and fuel and medicine, the world took note of something continually special about our great nation and what drives us. The lives of the Americans and their 11 compatriots who were lost reflected that spirit, those values, that heart, that hope, that brought us to protect the Kurds in the first place. They were literally part of a mission to provide comfort. They have honored us all with their compassion and courage, and ultimately, with their sacrifice.

We know, as has already been said, that those who enter the military understand clearly that they assume great risks. That even though the world has changed since the specter of the Cold War is fading, the way of life we cherish as Americans and our hopes for the rest of the world still depends upon their skills, their sacrifice, their courage, and their clear willingness to undertake those risks. And yet I have to say that as President and as an American, when it becomes the job of those of us in positions of responsibility to explain loss to these wonderful families that came about through a terrible accident, the burden of reminding all of us that all who serve undertook those risks, is still very great.

We must remember not only those who died for their country, but for how they were loved. We must, all the rest of us in America, pray for these families -- for the husband and the father whose young child will now have to learn about him through photographs and stories; for the family of an ambitious young man who wished to go to college and become an artist; for a distinguished American veteran of more than two decades whose soldiers loved him for his [steel edge] and his heart; for the wonderful daughter and sister who lifted those around her with her vigor and promise; for the young pilot who grew up with his heart set on the skies; and for all the others. Their lives were suddenly taken from their beloved families and from our nation and our service, and their important mission.

No one's words can wipe away the grief, the pain, the questions. It is our duty first, to continue the mission for which they gave their lives. Second, to find the answers which they rightfully seek. And third, to pray that together they will find the strength as the days go forward to ease their grief and lean on their faith.

The Americans we honor today represented the best in our country. In a tragic irony, all who were involved in this accident -- including the pilots of the two jets -- were there on a common mission, to save the lives of innocent people. We know that just as we are all proud of their ability and their bravery, their readiness for any challenge, their devotion to their families. We all understand that they, like we, none of us are immune from error, from tragic circumstance.

One of the fathers, himself an Air Force colonel said that he thought his daughter was a hero. Well, they're all heroes, and we owe it to them to honor their lives and their service, to answer the questions of their families, but more than anything else, to remember when words fail, that we are taught over and over again in the scripture that things will always happen that we can never fully understand. As President Lincoln said, "The Almighty has his own purposes." The faith that sustains us, according to the scripture, is the assurance of things hoped for, the convictions of things unseen.

As I look out into the faces of mothers and fathers and wives and sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, I say on behalf of a grateful nation, we honor your sacrifice. We will do our best to live every day with the memory of your sacrifice. We pray for you that time will give you the strength and the faith to remember the very best and finest of the lives of your loved ones, to be always grateful for what they did, and never cynical -- even in the face of this tragedy. For there are things which happen to us all which can never be fully understood. What is clear and beyond any doubt is that they loved their country, and they swore an oath, including their willingness to give their lives for their country. They did it in a very noble cause.

We share your grief. We honor their lives. We pray for you and for their souls.

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